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Raw deal: Utah gets California pollution

Dirty air: Utahns pay with their environment for selling coal-generated power to the Golden State

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While Utah vehemently resists being regarded as the nation's dumping ground for radioactive waste, it is one of four Western states apparently willing to serve the same purpose for California's air pollution.

That's the message of a new report on coal-fired electric plants in the interior West. The report's authors calculate the amount of pollution spewed in the interior West, where coal plants supply about 20 percent of California's electricity.

The plants - Intermountain Power Project in Utah, Four Corners and San Juan in New Mexico, Mohave and Reid Gardner in Nevada and the Navajo Generating Station in Arizona - emit 10 times more sulfur dioxide than all the plants in California, 10 times more smog-forming nitrogen oxide, 200 times the mercury and 67 million tons of carbon dioxide, which feeds global warming.

By comparison, stringent clean-air regulations ensure the power plants within California's borders emit virtually no sulfur dioxide or mercury, two of the most noxious pollutants tied to the electricity industry, says the report compiled by the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, Environmental Defense and Western Resource Advocates.

Despite steps taken during the past six months to curtail the problem, California's pollution is likely to blanket the West for decades to come due to long-term contracts with Western power plants. If the greenhouse gases continue to be emitted at current levels - equivalent to the emissions from more than 11 million cars - they will equal reductions California expects to see due to strict new tailpipe emissions standards, essentially wiping out the gains.

"While the power from these coal plants is transmitted many miles to customers in California, the pollution and environmental disturbances stay behind, sending a cascade of human health and environmental impacts across the American West and the globe," says the report that uses data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Energy and the California Energy Commission.

It's as if millions of ghostly California drivers are motoring about the West trailing clouds of exhaust.

According to the EPA, during 2002 and 2003, the IPP plant near Delta emitted an average of 14.95 million tons per year of carbon dioxide.

"These annual emissions are equivalent to those from 2.6 million cars," said Jana Milford, Environmental Defense senior scientist.

By comparison, in 2003, 1.7 million cars, trucks and motorcycles were registered in Utah, said Peter Verschoor, a Utah Division of Air Quality scientist who monitors vehicle-related emissions.

The power plants highlighted in the report, called "Clearing California's Coal Shadow from the American West," are located in remote areas near the Grand Canyon, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon, Arches, Capitol Reef and Zion national parks. According to the advocates who wrote the report released Thursday, air quality in the areas around the plants regularly exceed California's ozone pollution standards.

"This is the first time anyone has ever actually taken a total-picture look at the results of selling power to California," said Tim Wagner, the Utah Sierra Club's Smart Energy Campaign director. "It [negates] the long tradition this state has with coal, and this automatic assumption this is a safe thing and we don't have to worry about it."

California is the biggest potential customer for so-called merchant plants, built to sell power on the open market. The state needs to add about 1,000 megawatts a year - enough for about 1 million homes - to its grid to meet its growing needs. More than 20 new coal-fired plants are being proposed in seven Western states with an eye to selling electricity to California.

But in June, amid increased concern about global climate change, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued an executive order making a top priority of protecting the environment, including that of states from which California imports power. On Oct. 6, the California Public Utilities Commission has validated the governor's order. Last week, the state's Energy Commission solidified the initiative.

From now on, the state's primary goal is energy efficiency, followed by having energy from renewable sources account for a third of its electricity by 2020. The rest would be subject to greenhouse gas performance standards that would exclude the kind of power now generated from coal in the West.

That doesn't mean coal would no longer be used to create electricity. Experiments with coal gasification, which

strips out pollutants and allows the capture of greenhouse gases, are close to proving the technology is economically achievable.

Reed Searle, IPP's general manager, says states, including Utah, are forming regional partnerships to pursue carbon sequestration - that is, capturing carbon dioxide for reuse or deep injection into the earth. Two of those projects are in Utah, where carbon dioxide will be injected into oilfields.

Though gasification can add 20 percent to the cost of generation, "what's going on in California will drive that technology. It should come pretty fast," Searle said.

Sarah Wright, executive director of Utah Clean Energy, a nonprofit public interest group working to speed the transition to sustainable alternative energy, says power from wind, landfill methane, biomass and geothermal sources are all less expensive than any new fossil fuel approaches, including gasification.

"If you look at the risk of future carbon regulation and the risk of volatile fuel cost, the cost of renewables is offset," she said. "We're at a crossroads in our energy decisions. If California is willing to pay the incremental increase for renewables, it should jump-start the market."

Meanwhile, because California's contracts with Western power plants are long-term - for example, IPP's electricity generation contract with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power doesn't expire until 2027 - the pollution likely will continue.

Milford, the Environmental Defense scientist, calculated California's share of IPP's greenhouse gas emissions will total 329 million tons during the next 22 years.